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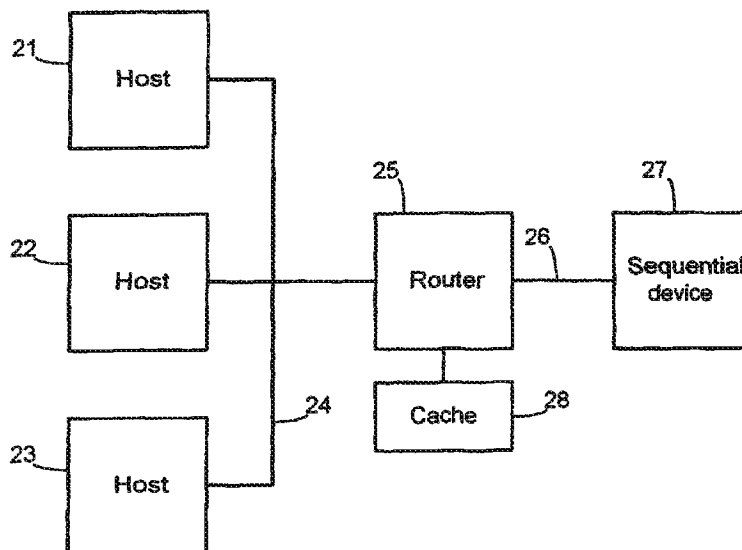
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[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: **SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR INQUIRY CACHING**



(57) Abstract: A system and method for servicing inquiry commands, wherein inquiry data is stored in a memory (28) and if an inquiry command for the target device (27) is received while the target device (27) is busy processing another command, the stored inquiry data is returned in response to the command. In one embodiment, a router (25) contains a memory for storing static inquiry data corresponding to each of a plurality of sequential devices connected thereto. The first time a host (21, 22, or 23) sends an inquiry command to one of the sequential devices, the router (25) routes the command to the target device (27) and stores the data returned by the device. Subsequent inquiry commands are serviced by passing the command through to the target device (27) if it is not busy, or returning inquiry data from the router's memory if the target device (27) is busy processing another command.

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DESCRIPTION

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR INQUIRY CACHING

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates generally to network systems and more particularly to systems and methods implemented in a network having a plurality of client devices that may submit commands to the same server device, wherein commands for relatively static data may be blocked until a previous command is serviced.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A computer network is comprised essentially of a group of devices that are coupled together by a communication medium. A network may be as simple as two devices that are wired to each other, or as complex as the Internet. The devices in a network can communicate with each other and provide services to each other (or, conversely, use each other's services).

The devices may be of many different types. For example, some may be host devices (hosts) that initiate commands, while others may be devices which are designed to service the hosts (e.g., data storage devices). Networks may be configured in many different ways. For instance, referring to FIGURE 1, one particular configuration of a storage area network (SAN) is illustrated. It should be noted that a SAN may be configured in many different ways, and that the configuration illustrated in FIGURE 1 is exemplary.

In the SAN of FIGURE 1, a plurality of hosts 11-13 are coupled to a sequential device 15 by a transmission medium 14. ("Sequential device," as used here, refers to a device that is sequentially accessed, such as a tape drive, rather than one which can be randomly accessed, such as a disk drive.) Sequential device 15 is configured to sequentially process requests for data which are received from hosts 11-13.

Hosts 11-13 may transmit several different kinds of commands to sequential device 15. one type of command is an inquiry command. "Inquiry command," for the purposes of this disclosure, will refer to commands which request data that, for the most part, is static. This data, which will be referred to herein as "inquiry data," typically relates to the device itself, rather than data which is designed to store or generate. For instance, inquiry data may include the serial number, manufacturer, configuration, version number, or similar data. It should be noted that, however, that inquiry data may also include data that changes relatively infrequently, rather than being strictly static.

Inquiry commands may be submitted to device 15 for various reasons. For example, when a new host is booted, it checks to see what other devices are connected to the network. Hosts may also periodically use inquiry commands to obtain information regarding the availability of devices on the network. If a device responds to the command, the host will receive the responsive inquiry data and will be aware that the device is available. If the device does not respond, the host may assume either

that the device is no longer connected to the network, or that the device is no longer functioning properly.

One of the problems with handling inquiry commands in sequential devices is that these commands may be submitted to a sequential device just after the device has received a command that will take a substantial amount of time to process. Conventionally, no distinction is made between inquiry commands and other commands, so the inquiry command in this example will be handled in the same manner as any other command – it will be serviced when the device becomes available. Until the previously received command is serviced, the inquiry command will be blocked. If the inquiry command is blocked for long enough, it will time out. As a result of having timed out, the host may assume that the device is no longer operational or no longer connected to the network, even though it is both connected and operational.

It would therefore be desirable to provide a means for servicing inquiry commands in a sequential device while other commands are being processed by the device.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

One or more of the problems outlined above may be solved by the various embodiments of the invention. Broadly speaking, the invention comprises systems and methods for storing inquiry data for a device so that inquiry commands to the device can be serviced when the device is busy processing a previously received command.

In one embodiment, a router contains a memory for storing static inquiry data corresponding to each of a plurality of sequential devices connected thereto. The first time a host sends an inquiry command to one of the sequential devices, the router routes the command to the target device and stores the data returned by the device. Subsequent inquiry commands are serviced by passing the command through to the target device if it is not busy, or returning inquiry data from the router's memory if the target device is busy processing another command. The router may be configured to determine whether the target device is busy in a number of ways. For example, it may track whether data has been returned in response to a command previously routed to the target device. The router may alternatively route all inquiry commands to the target device and, if the command is not serviced in a predetermined amount of time, the router may service the command from memory. Once the inquiry data has been stored in the router's memory, subsequent inquiry commands may be serviced either by always returning the data from the router's memory, or by returning the stored data only when the target device is busy and otherwise passing the command through to the target device so that it can service the request.

Another embodiment comprises a method in which inquiry data is stored in a memory apart from the corresponding target device, an inquiry command is subsequently received, and the inquiry command is serviced by returning the corresponding inquiry data from the memory. The method may

further comprise routing an initial inquiry command to the target device, regardless of whether the target device is busy, and continuing to do so until the target device returns responsive inquiry data, which is then stored in the memory. The method may include tracking whether data has been returned in response to a command previously routed to the target device to determine whether a target device is busy, or it may comprise routing all inquiry commands to the target device and servicing the commands from memory if they are not serviced in a predetermined amount of time. The method may comprise always servicing inquiry commands by returning the data from the router's memory, or it may comprise returning the stored data only when the target device is busy.

Other embodiments may include computers or other data processing devices, computer readable media (such as floppy disks, CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, etc.,) storage devices, computer memories and the like which contain software, firmware or other programming which embodies the foregoing methods. Numerous other alternative embodiments are also possible.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Other objects and advantages of the invention may become apparent upon reading the following detailed description and upon reference to the accompanying drawings.

FIGURE 1 is a diagram illustrating a plurality of host devices coupled to a sequential device in one embodiment.

FIGURE 2 is a diagram illustrating a system having a router configured to route the requests of several host devices to a sequential device.

FIGURE 3 is a diagram illustrating the routing of inquiry commands to a sequential device, the transmission of the responsive inquiry data and the storage of the inquiry data in a cache.

FIGURE 4 is a diagram illustrating the apparent configuration of a router and a sequential device with respect to a device that submits an inquiry command while the sequential device is busy processing a previous command.

FIGURE 5 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of a router in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIGURE 6 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of a router in accordance with an alternative embodiment of the present invention.

While the invention is subject to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments thereof are shown by way of example in the drawings and the accompanying detailed description. It should be understood, however, that the drawings and detailed description are not intended to limit the invention to the particular embodiment which is described. This disclosure is instead intended to cover all modifications, equivalents and alternatives falling within the scope of the present invention as defined by the appended claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

As noted above, host devices generally use the inquiry command to obtain information regarding the availability of devices on the network. If a host is booted up and a device on the network is busy, the device can't respond to the inquiry command. A mechanism is therefore
5 necessary to provide the responsive data, thereby keeping the host's inquiry command from timing out and keeping the host from assuming that the device is not available.

Referring to FIGURE 2, an exemplary system in accordance with one embodiment of the invention is shown. In this embodiment, a plurality of hosts 21-23 are coupled to a router 25. The hosts are configured to communicate with the router over a Fibre Channel network 24. Router 25 is
10 configured to convert data received from hosts 21-23 from the Fibre Channel protocol to the SCSI protocol. The data is then communicated over SCSI bus 26 to sequential device 27.

When one of hosts 21-23 needs to send a command to sequential device 27, it transmits the command to router 25, which then forwards the command to sequential device 27. If sequential device 27 is not processing any other commands, it is available to process the newly received
15 command. If sequential device 27 is processing a previous command, the subsequently received command cannot be processed until the previous command is completed.

Router 25, however, is coupled to a cache 28. Cache 28 is designed to store inquiry data associated with sequential device 27. If sequential device 27 is busy processing a command when an inquiry command is received by router 25, the router is configured to examine the inquiry command,
20 determine the data which is needed to respond to the command, and transmit the responsive data back to the host that generated the command.

This assumes, of course, that the cache contains the data necessary to respond to the inquiry command. When the router is booted, the cache contains no data. Consequently, it cannot provide any inquiry data in response to an inquiry command. If the router receives an inquiry command when
25 the responsive data is not in the cache, and the sequential device itself is not available to provide responsive data, the result is the same as for prior art systems – the inquiry command is blocked and, if the device does not become available to service the command soon enough, the command will time out. If the sequential device becomes available in time, it will service the command.

The first time the sequential device provides inquiry data to one of the hosts, the data is stored
30 by the router in its cache. This is illustrated in FIGURE 3. Thereafter, the router can provide the data in response to inquiry commands if the sequential device is busy. The router can, in some embodiments, be configured to provide the data in response to inquiry commands if the sequential device is offline, broken, missing, or cannot respond for some other reason. In one embodiment, an indicator is set in the inquiry data when the device cannot respond for some reason other than being
35 busy. If the inquiry data is returned with this indicator set, the requesting host knows that the inquiry data is the information that was requested, but the device is currently missing or offline. This

configuration may be useful in systems that have been altered to allow a device to be repaired and later re-inserted into the system without having to reconfigure the hosts to look for a device change. A host operator can therefore simply avoid using the device for a short period and then use it again when it has been replaced.

5 Referring to FIGURE 4, a diagram illustrating the effect of the present system and method is shown. In this figure, two host devices, 33 and 34, are connected to router 31. Router 31 is, in turn, connected to sequential device 32. As depicted in the figure, host device 33 issues a command to sequential device 32. In this particular instance, there are no other commands pending with sequential device 32 (host device 34 has not yet issued a command). Router 31 therefore forwards the command
10 to sequential device 32, which begins to process the command. (The command data path is indicated by arrow 35.)

It is assumed that the command issued by host device 33 is not an inquiry command and it takes a certain amount of time for sequential device 32 to process. While this first command is being processed by sequential device 32, host device 34 issues a command. The command issued by host
15 device 34 is an inquiry command. When this command is received by router 31, the router detects that sequential device 32, which is the target of the command, is busy. Router 31 therefore accesses its cache (not shown) and retrieves the inquiry data necessary to service the inquiry command. (This command data path is indicated by arrow 36.) To host device 34, it appears that its inquiry command was serviced by sequential device 32.

20 Referring to FIGURE 5, a flow diagram illustrating the operation of one embodiment of the present invention is shown. This figure corresponds to the functionality of a router as described above. First, a command is received from one of the host devices. The router must then determine whether or not the target sequential device is busy. If that target device is not busy, the command is forwarded to the target device. After that target device processes that command, it provides data
25 responsive to the command. This data is transmitted back to the router. The router does two things with the data: it stores the data in its cache; and it forwards the data to the host device that originally requested it. It should be noted that, if the return to data is truly static, the router need only store the data the first time it is returned. It is possible to skip the step of storing the data following subsequent responses to the same inquiry command. It is contemplated, however, that for purposes of simplicity,
30 it will be preferred to store the data each time it is returned.

If, when the router receives the command from the host device, the target device is busy, the router will respond to the request if possible. In order to provide a response, the router must have the data necessary to service the request stored in its cache. It therefore checks the cache to determine
35 whether or not it has this data. If the data is stored in the cache, the data is read from the cache and then forwarded to the host device in response to the inquiry command. If the data is not stored in the cache, the command is held by the router until the target device becomes available. If the command

does not time out before the target device becomes available, it will be forwarded to the target device. When the target device returns data responsive to the inquiry command, the data will be stored in the cache of the router and forwarded to the host device that requested it.

It should be pointed out that some provision should be made for determining when a target device has been disconnected from the router. If no mechanism is provided for this purpose, the router and host devices may simply assume that the target device is busy. In this case, the host devices may continue to make futile attempts to access the device. Possibly worse, the router may continue to provide inquiry data in response to commence from the host devices, thereby perpetuating the fallacy that the target device is still available. If, on the other hand, the device is identified as having been disconnected, the router and host devices can identify the target device as such. As a result, the host devices will not waste time attempting to access the target device, and the router will not erroneously provide inquiry data for a non-existent member of the network.

Referring to FIGURE 6, a flow diagram illustrating the operation of an alternative embodiment of the present invention shown. This diagram is, in many respects, similar to the diagram of FIGURE 5. In the diagram of FIGURE 6, however, the router's first action with respect to any received inquiry command is to determine whether or not data responsive to the command is stored in its cache. If the data is in the cache, it is read from the cache and returned to the host device without accessing the target device. If the data is not in the cache, the router must determine whether or not the target device is busy. If the target device is not busy, the inquiry command is forwarded to it. The data returned by the target device would then be forwarded to the requesting host device, as well as being stored in the router's cache for use in servicing future inquiry commands. If the target device is busy, the inquiry command is held until the target device becomes available. The inquiry command is then processed by the target device if it has not timed out.

The advantage of first checking the cache for the data is that the target device no longer has to deal with it. The command can be handled entirely by the router. The disadvantage of this embodiment is that it cannot be used when the inquiry data is slowly changing, as opposed to static. In the embodiment of FIGURE 5, slowly changing data would be updated whenever a host device issued an inquiry command and the target device was not busy (and therefore responded to the command). In the embodiment of FIGURE 6, the data which is originally stored in the cache in response to the inquiry command would be returned every time the inquiry command was received, regardless of whether or not the data that would be provided by the target device itself had changed. Thus, the embodiment of FIGURE 6 would be sufficient if the inquiry data never changed, but not if the data were slowly changing.

It should be noted that the flow diagrams of FIGURES 5 and 6 do not explicitly include the step of determining whether a received command comprises an inquiry command or other command requesting static or near-static data. If the received command is a request for sequential data stored on

the device, there is no need to process the command according to the flow diagrams, since the data will not be stored in the same manner as inquiry data. The determination that a received command is a request for sequential data will therefore cause the remainder of the flow diagram to be bypassed. If the received command is an inquiry command, the method of the flow diagram will proceed.

5 It should be noted that, although the embodiments described above are directed to systems in which a router is used to couple a set of Fibre Channel hosts to a SCSI device, the present systems and methods are not limited to use in Fibre Channel-to-SCSI systems, nor is it necessary that there be any protocol conversion at all. Other embodiments may use devices coupled between communication media having other protocols, or even between media having protocols which are identical to each
10 other. Further, it is not necessary that the systems/methods be implemented in a router. Other embodiments may employ alternative types of devices to perform the functions of the routers described above (i.e., the storage and return of inquiry data). For example, this functionality may be incorporated into circuitry within the sequential device. Another embodiment may comprise a software application (and/or the media on which the application is stored) for controlling a router or
15 other device to provide the desired functionality.

The benefits and advantages which may be provided by the present invention have been described above with regard to specific embodiments. These benefits and advantages, and any elements or limitations that may cause them to occur or to become more pronounced are not to be construed as a critical, required, or essential features of any or all of the claims. As used herein, the
20 terms "comprises," "comprising," or any other variations thereof, are intended to be interpreted non-exclusively, including the elements or limitations which follow those terms. Accordingly, a process, method, article, or apparatus that comprises a list of elements does not include only those elements but may include other elements not expressly listed or inherent to the claimed process, method, article, or apparatus.

25 While the present invention has been described with reference to particular embodiments, it should be understood that the embodiments are illustrative and that the scope of the invention is not limited to these embodiments. Many variations, modifications, additions and improvements to the embodiments described above are possible. For example, these variations may include computers or other data processing devices, computer readable media (such as floppy disks, CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, etc.,) storage devices, computer memories and the like which contain software, firmware or
30 other programming which embodies the foregoing methods. It is contemplated that these variations, modifications, additions and improvements fall within the scope of the invention as detailed within the following claims.

CLAIMS

1. A method comprising:

storing inquiry data corresponding to a target device in a cache memory;

receiving a request for the inquiry data corresponding to the target device;

5 reading the inquiry data from the cache memory; and

providing the inquiry data corresponding to the target device in response to the request.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising collecting the inquiry data corresponding to the target device prior to storing the inquiry data corresponding to the target device.

10 3. The method of claim 2, wherein collecting the inquiry data corresponding to the target device comprises detecting the inquiry data corresponding to the target device as the inquiry data corresponding to the target device is transmitted from the target device to a requesting host device.

15 4. The method of claim 2, wherein collecting the inquiry data corresponding to the target device comprises detecting a request for the inquiry data corresponding to the target device as the request is routed from a host to the target device and copying the inquiry data corresponding to the target device which is returned by the target device in response to the request.

20 5. The method of claim 1, wherein providing the inquiry data corresponding to the target device in response to the request comprises determining whether the target device is busy, and providing the stored inquiry data corresponding to the target device if the target device is busy and providing inquiry data returned by the target device if the target device is not busy.

25 6. The method of claim 5, wherein if the target device is not busy, the inquiry data that is returned by the target device in response to the request is stored in the cache memory in place of previously stored inquiry data.

30 7. The method of claim 1, wherein the inquiry data from the cache memory is provided to the target device in response to the request regardless of whether or not the target device is busy.

8. The method of claim 1, further comprising storing inquiry data corresponding to each of a plurality of target devices, receiving requests for the inquiry data corresponding to one or more of the target devices, determining whether the corresponding target devices are busy and, for each of the target devices that is busy, returning the corresponding stored inquiry data, and, for each of the target devices that is not busy, returning the corresponding inquiry data returned by the target device.

35

9. The method of claim 1, further comprising: upon receiving a first request for inquiry data, forwarding the first request to the target device regardless of whether or not the target device is busy, storing inquiry data returned in response to the first request, forwarding inquiry data returned in response to the first request to a requesting device and, in response to subsequent requests, reading the inquiry data returned in response to the first request from the cache memory and providing the inquiry data returned in response to the first request in response to the subsequent requests.

10. The method of claim 1, further comprising determining whether a received command comprises a request for inquiry data and: if the received command comprises a request for inquiry data, reading the inquiry data from the cache memory and providing the inquiry data corresponding to the target device in response to the request; and if the received command does not comprise a request for inquiry data, forwarding the command to the target device for execution.

11. A device comprising:
a router configured to route data between one or more hosts and one or more target devices;
and
a memory coupled to the router;
wherein the router is configured to store inquiry data received from the one or more target devices and to provide at least a portion of the stored inquiry data in response to a request for inquiry data corresponding to one of the target devices that is busy.

12. The device of claim 11, wherein the router is configured to detect the inquiry data as the inquiry data is transmitted from the target device to a requesting host device.

13. The device of claim 11, wherein the router is configured to detect a request for the inquiry data as the request is routed from a host to the target device and copying the inquiry data which is returned by the target device in response to the request.

14. The device of claim 11, wherein the router is configured to determine whether the target device is busy, and provide the stored inquiry data if the target device is busy and providing inquiry data returned by the target device if the target device is not busy.

15. The device of claim 14, wherein, if the target device is not busy, the router is configured to store the inquiry data returned by the target device in response to the request in the cache memory in place of previously stored inquiry data.

16. The device of claim 11, wherein the router is configured to provide the inquiry data from the cache memory to the target device in response to the request regardless of whether or not the target device is busy.

17. The device of claim 11, wherein the router is configured to store inquiry data corresponding to each of a plurality of target devices, to receive requests for the inquiry data corresponding to one or more of the target devices, to determine whether the corresponding target devices are busy and to return the corresponding stored inquiry data for each of the target devices that is busy, and returning the corresponding inquiry data returned by the target device for each of the target devices that is not busy.

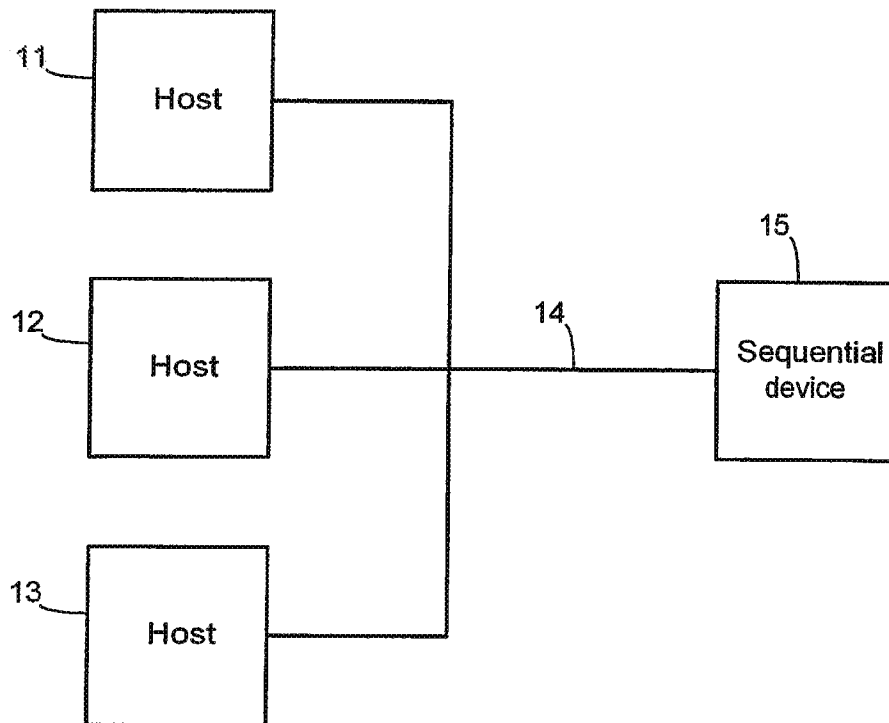
18. The device of claim 11, wherein if the inquiry data is not stored in the cache, the router is configured to: upon receiving a first request for inquiry data, forward the first request to the target device regardless of whether or not the target device is busy; store inquiry data returned in response to the first request; forward inquiry data returned in response to the first request to a requesting device; and, in response to subsequent requests, reading the inquiry data returned in response to the first request from the cache memory and providing the inquiry data returned in response to the first request in response to the subsequent requests.

19. The device of claim 11, wherein the router is configured to determine whether a received command comprises a request for inquiry data and wherein the router is configured to: if the received command comprises a request for inquiry data, read the inquiry data from the memory and provide the inquiry data corresponding to the target device in response to the request; and if the received command does not comprise a request for inquiry data, forward the command to the target device for execution.

20. A storage area network comprising:
one or more host devices;
one or more sequential access devices; and
circuitry coupled between the one or more host devices and the one or more sequential access devices and coupled to a cache memory;
wherein the circuitry is configured
to receive from a first one of the host devices a request for inquiry data corresponding
to a targeted one of the sequential access devices, and
to return inquiry data from the cache memory to the first host device.

21. The storage area network of claim 20, wherein the circuitry is configured:
if the targeted sequential access device is busy, to return inquiry data from the cache memory
to the first host device; and
5 if the targeted sequential access device is not busy, to forward the request to the targeted
sequential access device and return inquiry data received from the targeted sequential
access device to the first host device.

10 22. A computer readable medium, wherein the computer readable medium contains one or more
instructions which are configured to cause a computer to perform the method comprising:
storing inquiry data corresponding to a target device in a cache memory;
receiving a request for the inquiry data corresponding to the target device;
reading the inquiry data from the cache memory; and
15 providing the inquiry data corresponding to the target device in response to the request.



(Prior Art)
Fig. 1

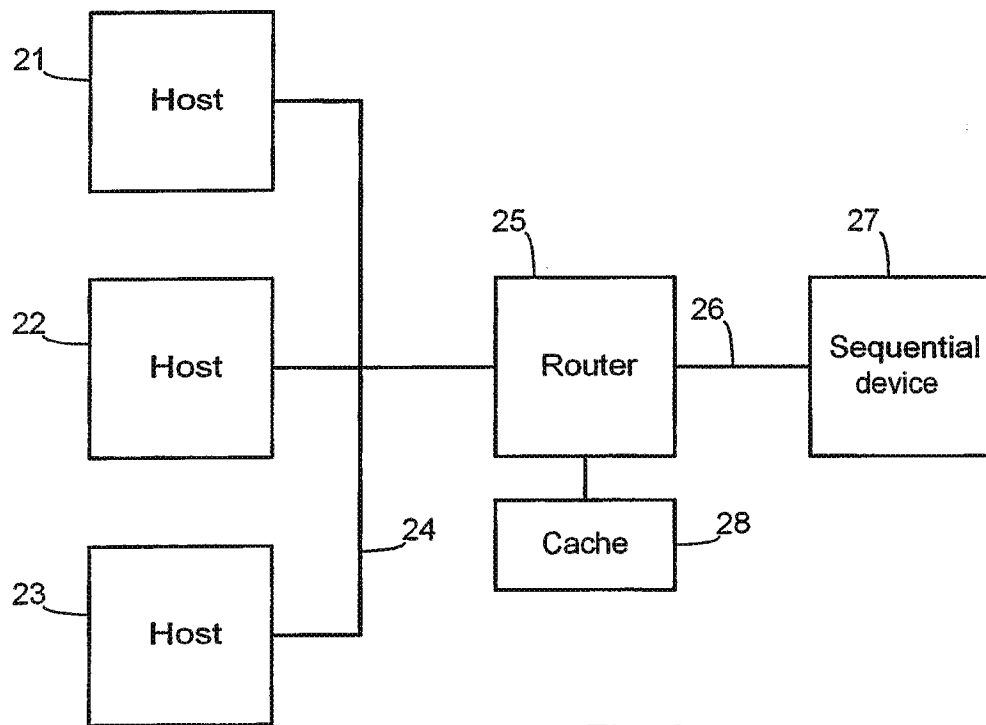
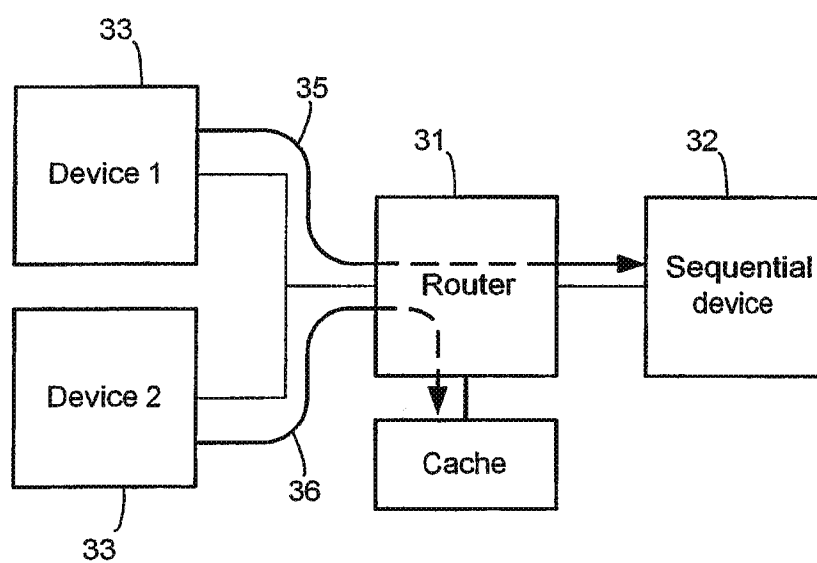
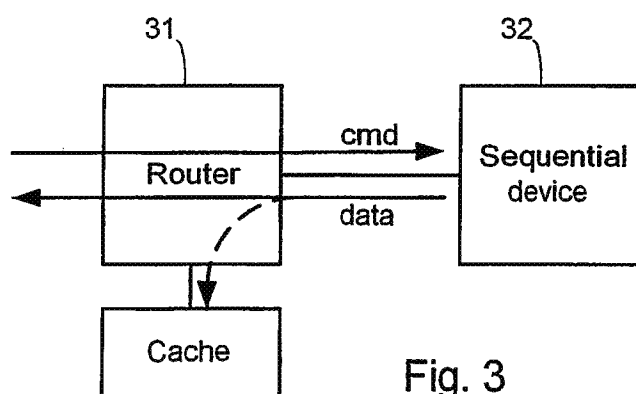


Fig. 2



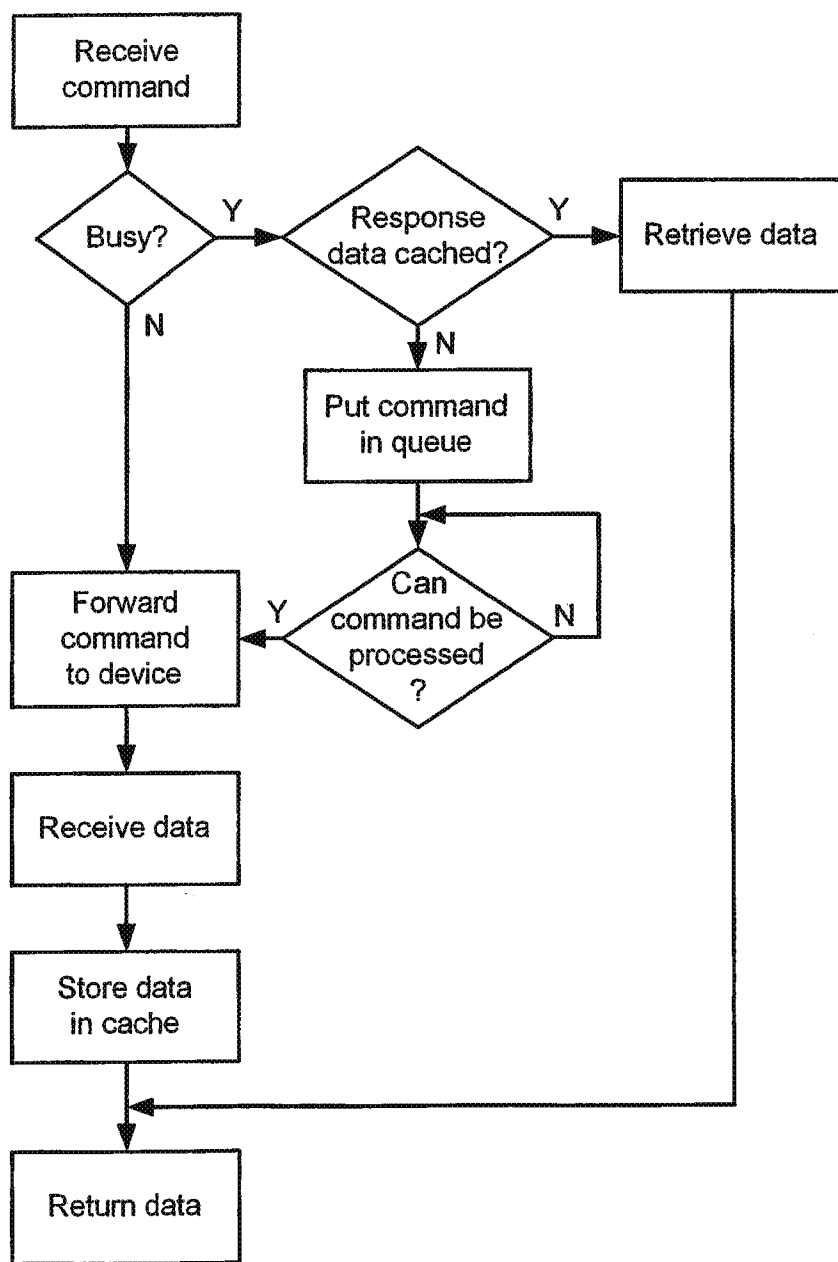


Fig. 5

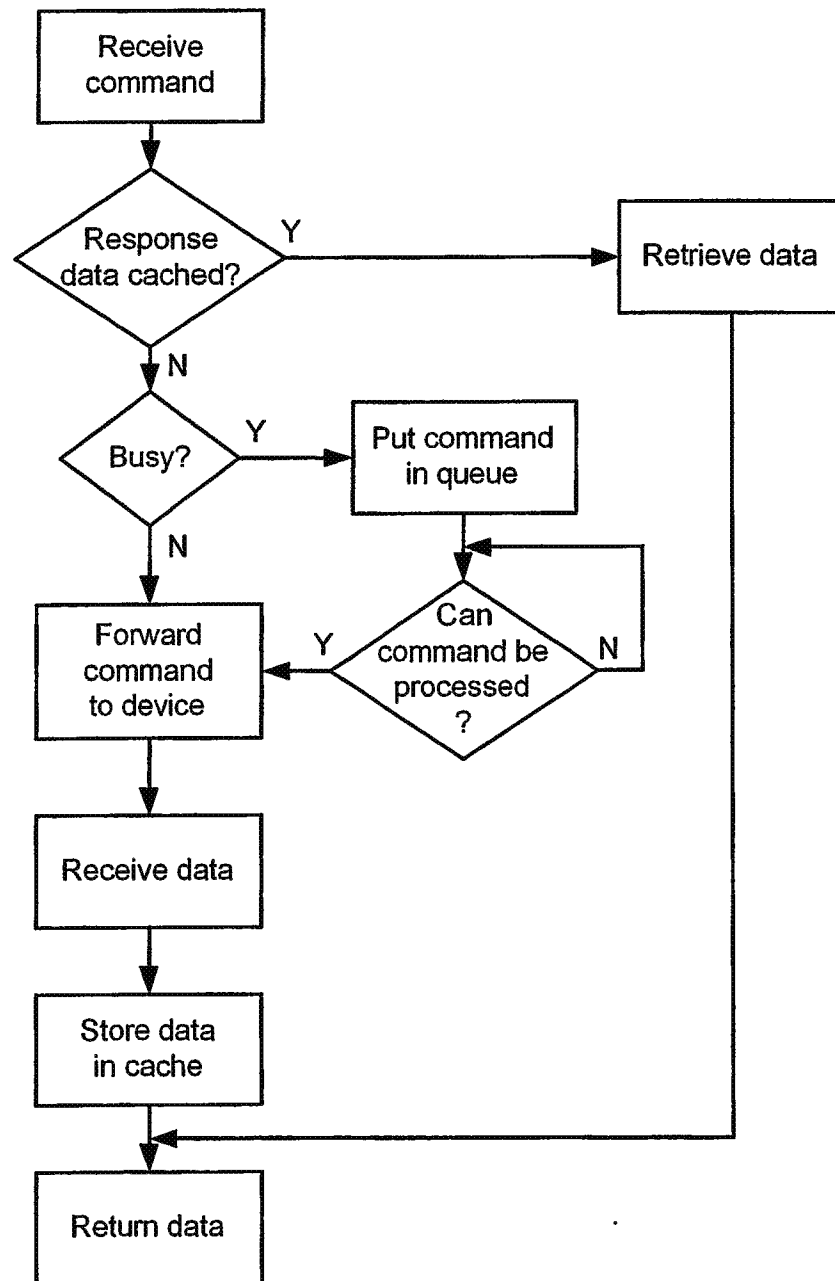


Fig. 6

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US03/17884

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 7/00

US CL : 709/203, 217, 224, 227, 228, 232; 707/101, 101, 102

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 709/203, 217, 224, 227, 228, 232; 707/101, 101, 102

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched
Microsoft Computer DictionaryElectronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)
Please See Continuation Sheet**C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT**

| Category * | Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages | Relevant to claim No. |
|------------|---|-----------------------|
| Y | US 6,247,077 B1 (MULLER et al) June 12 2001, fig.2, abstract, col.4 line 13 to col.5 line 61 and col.12 lines 5-45 | 1-22 |
| Y,EP | US 6,591,272 B1 (WILLIAMS) 08 July 2003, abstract, col.7 line 7 to col.8 line 59, col.9 line 20 to col.10 line 50 and col.13 lines 8-67 | 1-22 |
| A | US 6,249,800 B1 (AMAN et al) abstract, fig.1, col.11 line 13 to col.12 line 60 and col.15 lines 2-45 JUNE 19, 2001 | 1-22 |

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.☐ See patent family annex.

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"E" earlier application or patent published on or after the international filing date

"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

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"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T"

later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X"

document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y"

document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&"

document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

22 July 2003 (22.07.2003)

Date of mailing of the international search report

12 AUG 2003

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

PCT/US03/17884

Continuation of B. FIELDS SEARCHED Item 3:

IEEE, WEST, EAST

search terms: inquiry commands, network, internet, client, server, processing, target device, monitoring networks, sequential access, Internet Protocol, cache